AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

WAR MOVIES DECODED

UNDERSTANDING THE LOGIC OF WAR MOVIE MAKING
FROM HOLLYWOOD TO BOLLYWOOD
AND ITS USE TO SPREAD PROPAGANDA

By

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A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements

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Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

April 2014

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Introduction

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Why is a war film made? The need to communicate and that too effectively has been a

constant endeavor of mankind. Right from the grunts of the cave man to the pokes of the

Facebook man, communication has been at the heart of invention. In communication, motion

picture has held a special place. In *Why We Fought*, O'Connor argues that motion pictures have

been more poignant than literature in capturing the essence of war and goes on to observe that

"the oldest evidence of human experience is not in written manuscripts at all but in the iconic

forms of cave paintings and physical artifacts left behind by ancient civilizations…Like the

archaeologists studying images on cave walls, the work of popular culture scholars involves a

different language and demands a different sensibility."[1] Understanding this sensibility as

regards the war movie is the essence of this paper. Any communication tool or medium,

including motion pictures, require two basic players, namely, the communicator and the

recipient. War movies are made to firstly, cater to the entertainment need of a "target audience."

secondly, to satisfy the varied personal need of "the producer;" and thirdly, to cater to the

propaganda needs of "the government," which due to the very nature of the topic is

disproportionately interested in the genre of war movies. Gary Freitas in his book *War Movies*

states:

> Governments have always banned, censored, blacklisted and protested war films
> for fear of their ability to influence public opinion. Either directly or indirectly,
> governments have financed and assisted films that furthered their political
> agendas. Attempts by governments to gain public support for war efforts and to
> help military recruitment have been and continue to be ongoing.[2]

In my thesis statement, I will analyze why war movies are made and how they can be made effective in spreading propaganda of the interested groups, especially the government. To help analyze the movies in the correct perspective, I shall introduce the triad of interest groups in war movie appreciation, namely, the producer, the government and the target audience. These three interest groups that form the three legs of the triad interact with each other in a dynamic relationship. It is important for us to understand contextually which sides of this triangle are significant. We will see how the requirement of these three interest groups shapes the production of war movies. This in turn will provide us a better understanding of the reason why war films are made and whether it has been able to satisfy the requirements of these three groups. The interaction between these three interest groups will allow us to understand whether the movie has been effective in spreading its message, especially the government propaganda. This in turn would guide us to draw conclusions that would help appreciate and critique war movies. We shall limit the scope to the visual media, primarily movies from Hollywood and Bollywood, the Indian film industry.

Defining the Communicators in the Triad

The communicators, that is, the government and the production teams form the base of the triangle of the triad. For the purpose of this paper unless specified, the producer or production team shall imply the entire team of producers, directors, and production teams; the government shall imply the politicians, DOD and its individual services. The government and the producer may or may not align their interests. When the interests align, the government provides assistance to the producer if the producers meet certain basic requirements. These requirements have been summarized by prominent military historian, Lawrence H. Suid in his book *Stars and Stripes on Screen*, to include propaganda that would "aid recruiting, help force retention, and

inform the viewers of their mission and abilities to defend and protect the nation."[3] The

producers on their part wanted to give an authentic ambience to their war movies at little or no

cost by utilizing government/military men, equipment, and locations. Suid terms this relationship

as one of "mutual exploitation."[4] He further proceeds to classify government assistance to war

movie production as full, limited, information only and finally "not requested, not required."

"The degree and kind of military assistance," Suid says, "varied with the requirements of the

particular production.[5] Of particular note, is when, the interests of the government and the

producers do not align. In this case the role of the government is less of a collaborator and more

that of a moderator or censor. Having introduced the relationship between the two main

communicators, that is, the producer and the government, let us understand their relationship

with the third interest group of the triad, that is, the target audience.

Defining the Recipients in the Triad

The apex of the triangle is aptly formed by the recipient of the communication, that is, the

target audience. There is a reason why we refer to it as "target" audience and not merely

audience. This is because movies like any other form of media are witnessed by a wide range of

audience. However, it is important for the communicator to understand which audience is

specifically being targeted. This requires profiling of the target audience by the communicators,

that is, the producer and the government. The target audience can be identified and understood

by answering a few basic questions: Who pays to see the movie? Who can influence policy?

Who needs to be influenced? Who needs entertainment? The target audience is a function of

what is the information being communicated and for what reason. For example, Disney

animation movies have expanded story lines and incorporated technological sophistication to

engage a wider target audience, other than children, in order to ensure greater commercial

returns. However, the expanding market of movies due globalization have placed a challenging task to the communicators, who form the base of the triangle. So, while production houses have to estimate the commercial viability of war movies in prominent commercial markets, the government has to carefully weigh whether the propaganda value of movies made for a particular home target audience can be counter-productive in the international arena. This target audience and the demands it places on the producer, who also needs to be cognizant of government interest, is the key to the understanding how effective war movies are made. The recipient of information, that is, the target audience, through their reaction to a war movie can actually communicate significant messages to the producer and more importantly to the government. The box office returns, the critique columns and popular sentiment are indicators of the target audience communicating back to their communicators, that is, the producer and the government. This sometimes is effectively utilized by independent film makers. For example, by making *Fahrenheit 9/11* as a critique of Bush Administration, Michael Moore was aiming his message not only to the general public, which are the traditional target audience, but also to the government of President George W. Bush, which cannot ignore such adverse publicity.[6] In such cases the government usually comes out with a movie of its own, but with the added risk that it might further damage the governments cause. However, O'Connor says, "the fact that a motion picture of war has been made outside the studio system does not guarantee a truly balanced perspective; in fact, the reverse may be true."[7] The customer, they say, is "King" and so too in the appreciation of war movies, the verdict of the target audience, which may include the public, critics, lobbyists, international groups, and so forth, is the mark of the success of a war movie. Therefore, the "target audience," at the apex of the triangle is the driving force for our triad of

war movie making, while the producer and the government provide the solid foundation as the base of the triad.

Basis of Analyses using the Triad

Let us start by using the triad to analyze an overtly propaganda movie like the *Why We Fight* series and use it as a segue to study other movies that would help broaden our understanding of how the message of war movies get conveyed. *Why We Fight* is a series of seven propaganda movies commissioned by the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration (the government, and the pentagon under General Marshall) and executed by filmmaker Frank Capra (the producer) for the Americans (the target audience).[8] The conceptual lens of the triad allows us to understand this movie. The *target audience*, which in this case is the American public, had to be influenced for motivation to fight the enemy and supporting the federal government morally, materially and financially. The limitations of main stream media as compared to the present day and the total nature of the war meant that the public would be easily receptive to the movie's propaganda. John Chambers in his book *World War II Film and History* writes why war movies were the right choice for propaganda aimed at the US target audience:

> Motion pictures provided an effective means of building unity in WWII in part because audiences in urban, industrialized nations, such as the US, had become accustomed in the preceding decades to going to movie theaters regularly as a way of obtaining information and entertainment. By the 1940s, more than half of the potential American audience went to the movies at least once a week."[9]

The government, who wanted the movie made, wanted to recruit more people and use it as propaganda to sustain the civil support for US war efforts. O'Connor says, "Motion pictures were important weapons…federal government found ways to control film content during both world wars."[10] *The producer* (the director), Frank Capra, like most filmmakers of that time, was fiercely patriotic; following Pearl Harbor, he joined the US Army as a Major and was tasked by Gen George C. Marshal to make these propaganda movies, which earned him a Distinguished

Service Medal. O'Connor notes that "most of the Hollywood moguls were ahead of the public when it came to supporting intervention."[11] This kind of war movie making can be described as *a non-zero sum game* approach in which all three parts of the triad benefited because the three interest groups had only one common goal - to defeat the Axis powers. More importantly, all three agreed that war was the common method of achieving their objective. However, it is not purely a non-zero sum game, because the target audience, especially for Hollywood films, also includes the international audience, which may not necessarily approve. For example, *All Quiet on the Western Front* was the story which accurately depicted the depressing effect of the Great War (WWI) on the individual young soldier, who enthusiastically volunteered from the classroom to the front. This anti-war movie which was released in 1930 won the Academy Award for best picture and was a box office hit in the US and France. The Nazis, who were just about making their presence felt in Germany thought otherwise and named the film *Juden-Schmutzfilm* (a Jewish smear film) and used it for their propaganda machine.[12] The denunciation of the film appeared in *Volkischer Beobachter*, edited by Adolf Hitler:

> That last American Jewish product deals with a nasty and mean denigration of German front soldiers who are demonstrated to the audience in a bizarre and distorted manner. And this fact carries weight as the film was made by American Jews and cast with American actors who are partly Jewish.[13]

Germans had got used to political fighting but David Imhoof observes that "not everyone cared about politics – but almost everyone went to the movies." Nazis, Communists, Social Democrats, middle-class liberals, elitists, and mass culture advocates all recognized that the film *All Quiet on the Western Front* was significant.[14] The first appeasement of Nazis by Western powers, arguably, began when Universal Studios "made some judicious edits before the German-language dubbed version premiered in Berlin."[15] Rollins and O'Connor argue that "like other cultural activities in Germany, local movie-going in the interwar period aided the process of

Nazification as much as national and international political events did."[16] Therefore, we see the unintended adverse propaganda on a foreign (German) target audience, when Hollywood only caters to American audience. It is important to understand additional implications if all three members of the triad blindly complement each other, especially when the government is pushing its propaganda like it did in *Why We Fight*.

The problem with the triads' supposed *non-zero sum game* approach, like we have seen in *Why We Fight* series, is that it may encourage callousness and allow the government and the target audience to perpetuate crime in the garb of popular war. In *Why We Fight*, the uncomfortable issue of justifying the Soviet invasion of Poland exemplifies how the government can drive propaganda and distort facts to solicit public support. Misinforming the public using jingoistic bandwagons can stir up passions and hatred against an imaginary enemy. In the case of *Why We Fight*, the Soviet Union (the aggressor) was shown as having a legitimate right over Poland (the oppressed).While history has judged WWII as the "good war," the same may not be said about the Vietnam War or the second Gulf War. Trivializing Soviet occupation of Poland in *Why We Fight*; and racially profiling Japanese in Disney's *Victory through Air Power* could be forgiven, considering the justified angst against the evil of the Axis powers. The same cinematic liberty is not likely to be appreciated or condoned by the target audience for war against an enemy that was of minimal threat to the national interest, as was the case of the freedom -seeking North Vietnamese enemy or Saddam's hollow Iraqi dictatorship. In *Stars and Stripes*, Haverstick says, "Suid advanced the thesis that the US fell so easily into the quagmire that the Vietnam War became because the American people had always seen their military win on the real, as well as the cinematic, battlefield."[17] However, it takes a bold producer and an enlightened, mature and well informed target audience to appreciate anti-war movies or the enemy's perspective that go

against the government's war propaganda. Such boldness on the part of the producer may be appreciated before a war, as was the case in pre-world war II (WWII) with *All Quiet on the Western Front, Dawn Patrol*, and so forth, or after a war, as was the case in post-Vietnam war with *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, and so forth. During a war the best position acceptable by the triad, that is, the target audience, the government and the producer, is a kind of status quo, with no pro-war or anti-war movie on the ongoing war being produced. This was the case for about a decade of Vietnam War, when except for *The Green Beret*, the lack of any movie on the War unambiguously conveyed the message that no propaganda positive or negative regarding the Vietnam War was worth the effort or the risk. This interesting relationship between the triad allows us to understand an interesting aspect of war movie making that, as the world became more connected and information more transparent, the target audience became more discerning. However, the government under the Bush administration was still successful in running the biased propaganda using main stream media for intervention in Iraq during the second Gulf War, using a narrative of non-existent WMD. Therefore, the myth of information transparency in a globalized interconnected world is disputable. While modern military campaigns may last just a few months to allow any meaningful pro or anti-war movie production during the war, the same cannot be said of long drawn stability operations that have become inherent to recent military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The lack of meaningful 360 degree approach on these two recent wars is reminiscent of the days of biased movie making practice during the two world wars when "scripts for Hollywood films were vetted closely … and guide lines were provided to the studios."[18] The government, therefore, can direct the narrative in its effort to use the information tool of war movies to spread its propaganda. Independent (without government assistance) film making by bold producers can be subject to censorship and persecution by the

government. The government, however, has to contend in present times with the scrutiny and plausible counter propaganda by 24 h main stream media. This abundance of information may result in the government's loss of credibility in subsequent propaganda movies or in ongoing wars that require public support. Therefore one finds that in the present day the government has to be careful when it markets or controls its propaganda, especially through the tight control it exercises during war movie assistance. The government would invariably need to promote its propaganda, while adapting to the sensibilities of the producer and the target audience. The solution would be to use the informational domain, while at the same time retain credibility by employing masterful story tellers, who can run the narrative to achieve the government agenda, like Frank Capra did with the *Why We Fight* series for the US government. However, this could further antagonize an international target audience, especially in countries where there is already some sort of civil unrest and antipathy against western or more specifically US culture. We have seen this in the German (Nazi) response to *All Quiet on the Western Front*. We can, therefore, summarize from our arguments provided so far that, the indiscriminate use and manipulation of the informational domain (of which the war movie is a part) by the government is likely to adversely affect how the war movie is received by the international target audience.

International Target Audience Analyses

The study of an international target audience and its relation with its domestic and international movie industry will allow us to broaden our understanding. The interaction between the triad, especially from the perspective of international target audience can be better appreciated by studying the Indian cinema industry, which is popularly known as Bollywood. The mistake that the producer and the government, as the originators of propaganda, can do is to generalize the interests of the target audience, especially that of the *international target*

audience. Freitas argues that "in order to know how people of a particular historical epoch felt about war, we would probably need to know how they felt about death."[19] He additionally states that since the modern American belief system is strongly influenced by "individualism," death without identification to a higher cause becomes meaningless and as a corollary war becomes meaningless. Therefore, he summarizes that all war movies "have become anti-war." This generalization may not extend to the Indian target audience, which we shall analyze as a sample of the international target audience. Limited wars with Pakistan and China and the last few decades of terrorism have influenced the reception given to war movies by Indian target audience, in the same way that wars involving America influenced the reception of American public to Hollywood war movies. However, India has never been involved in a total war and even in a nuclear armed Indian subcontinent; it has never lived in fear of "Mutual Assured Destruction" like the one that the US and the (erstwhile) Soviet Union lived in fear of during the Cold War. Despite continuous animosity and conflict since 1947, it was only as late as 1997 in producer, JP Dutta's *Border* that the enemy was for the first time identified by name as Pakistan![20] The war movie to the Indian audience was just an extension of entertainment with the military being merely an aid in the narrative. Gokulsing in his book *Indian Popular Cinema* observes,

> Hollywood film-makers sought to foster an illusion of reality and to encourage ready identification of audiences with characters on the screen. Indian cinema, on the other hand, grew out of different roots, and there was never a strongly felt need to conform to the 'invisible style' preferred by Hollywood. So while Indian filmmakers were greatly indebted to Hollywood, they also departed in significant ways from the work produced by Hollywood film directors.[21]

> The films emanating from Indian directors and producers are marked by a newly perfected blend of Hollywood-style gloss and an indigenous narrative ethos. These films are aimed at an audience that increasingly looks towards the West for its material needs, but instinctively turns inwards for self-assurance at the first perceived threat to tis cultural identity.[22]

This adaptation of Hollywood style to Bollywood style is better understood by examining how familiar tropes are handled.

In Bollywood, as was the case in Hollywood, the shifting demands of the target audience necessitate reinventing of standard movie formula and their tropes. The portrayal of the Indian Air Force (IAF) is a case in point. Inevitably in all the movies involving an Air Force officer – who always happens to be a pilot – the pilot dies in a plane crash. A prominent exception was the movie *Border*,[23] which was a block buster and in which the fighter pilot played by flamboyant actor, Jackie Shroff survives his Close Air Support (CAS) missions against the enemy tanks. The Air Force however continued to be stereotyped as casual, "happy-go-lucky," anglicized obnoxious individuals, who fiercely believed in the superiority of the Air Force over the other services. A significant departure was seen in the later movies like *Rang De Basanti*,[24] where the death of the fighter pilot was used not as clarion call for patriotism but as a rallying point by his friends to target the indifferent government and bureaucracy that forced their best youth to operate (or fly) inferior equipment, so as to pocket a neat profit using the military-industry complex. Such themes were in keeping with the public resentment of the 90s and early part of this decade wherein an ageing fleet of MiG 21s, infamously called the "widow maker" devastated parents, brothers, sisters and friends of deceased fighter pilots. They approached the mainstream media to air their grievances against the total lack of empathy by the government, which in their opinion always blamed the accident on "pilot – error." These examples highlight the production arm of the triad adapting and shaping their scripts to address public sentiments, while preserving the tropes (in this case the forever doomed to die in a crash fighter pilot) so as not to challenge the audience's perception of familiar tropes. One distinctive difference between a Hollywood and Bollywood movie is the use of music, song and dance to the theme and plot.[25]

Bollywood movies have always benefited from incorporating music, song and dance into the narrative and it is a tribute to this peculiar trait, that even today movie goers in India associate a particular movie with a particular music. Often the success of movies hinges on the success of its songs rather than the quality of other production departments.[26] That is why music composers in Bollywood movies earn the highest, sometimes even more than the director! Therefore while having a patriotic song or two is a given in any Indian war movie, the popularity of its music and the appeal of its lyrics are likely to increase the success of the war movie. This trend is seen even in the propaganda music videos released by the government on national integration, which we will better understand by analyzing how foreign governments manipulate their target audience.

The Manipulation of the Target Audience

Regarding politics and movies, O'Connor says, "It is safe to say that all war films have political implications, even when they appeal to avoid didacticism."[27] The international target audience is not immune from such political influence by their governments. The target audience in India is an interesting case study, as the country itself is more diverse ethnically, linguistically, religiously, and culturally than the European Union. Additionally politically, geographically and economically the contrast is so varied that it is next to impossible for the producer or even the government to spread propaganda through a one size fits all model. For example, the national integration promotional videos produced by the government include prominent personalities from the various Indian states singing in their regional languages but ultimately synchronizing their tunes.[28] While making such audio-visual programs, it is important for the government to take into consideration the cultural sensibilities of each state else the propaganda video may run counter to its intention. For example, the recent Bollywood movie, *Madras Café*,[29] whose central theme is the conflict in Sri Lanka and the assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv

Gandhi, ran into controversy in the Tamil speaking state of Tamil Nadu as it hurt the sentiments

of the Tamils many of whom are still sympathetic to the cause of the terrorist outfit, the LTTE,

which was fighting for Tamil rights in northern Sri Lanka.[30] So while this did not affect the

commercial success of the movie in the rest of the country, the considerable population of Tamils

as a target audience in India and the Tamil diaspora around the world meant that the producer

would risk alienating and antagonizing an entire ethnic population. If this group is influential

enough in the central (federal) government, which was the case with the Tamils, they could

pressurize the government to censor the movie. Additionally, it is not commercially prudent to

have a movie shunned by an entire target audience, who are not averse to paying for watching

dubbed Bollywood movies. Therefore, like in the case of *Madras Cafe*, where the producers

suitably edited the offensive scenes, a majority of producers are likely to choose the easier path.

As we have seen, Hollywood had similarly censored and suitably edited *All Quiet on the Western

Front* to ensure distribution in Germany, supposedly to cater to German sentiments, but not

overlooking the considerable box office returns of the German speaking "target audience" in

Europe. Conversely, the publicity generated by such controversial films has allowed many a

producer to garner cheap publicity, which call into question whether the controversy and the

subsequent compromise were pre-meditated. The opportunist producer is quick to produce cheap

'B' grade war movies that capitalize on the jingoistic emotions of the target audience, whose

country is at war. In Hollywood, we see this in the unprecedented reception given to the 'B'

grade movie *Hitler, Beast of Berlin* released in 1939 during the time when the American public

were becoming aware of the atrocities of Nazi Germany. Miller observes,

> At the time of its official release (15 Oct 1939), *Beast of Berlin* was a "hot" item,
> regardless of its B status. Cited as pro-war, inflammatory, and offensive to
> Germany, it was quickly shut down by the Production Code Administration and
> censorship boards in several states. After a month of editing, it reopened to

reviewer praise as the first fiction feature to depict the terrors of life inside the Third Reich.[31]

Having seen how the interest of the international target audience can drive both governments and producers to manipulate information – with parallels from Hollywood, let us analyze how and why the foreign communicators adapt to their audience.

In Bollywood, bold producers, who had reached a stage where they no longer needed to make profit, forayed into forbidden territory. Producer/Director Yash Chopra's *Veer Zaara* boldly portrayed an Indian Air Force helicopter pilot (Shah Rukh Khan) falling in love with a Pakistani girl, and he is willing to be incarcerated in a Pakistani jail for a better part of his life for his love.[32] The theme was so bold that it required Shah Rukh Khan, the biggest superstar of that time (with cult following on both sides of the border) to pull this off. Incidentally both Yash Chopra, the producer and Shah Rukh Khan, the actor have had strong associations with Pakistani people as they trace their ancestry to present day Pakistan. However, while undertaking such egalitarian propaganda the producer runs the risk of alienating his base of loyal audience, especially if the producer is not sensitive to the vista of current affairs that is coloring the real life landscape of his audience. So in the same year that *Veer Zaara* is released, that is, 2004 we have a relative newcomer Muslim producer, Farhan Akhtar, producing a pro-war, anti-Pakistan movie *Lakshya*.[33] The memories of Pakistani betrayal leading to the Kargil War of 1999 were still fresh in the minds of the Indian population. In a country which was divided by the British on religious lines, a Muslim producer had to be extra careful while handling a war movie involving (Muslim) Pakistan. Gokulsing says, "Indian popular cinema has almost always highlighted the Hindu hero."[34] While no longer the practice in the present day, yester year stars like Muhammad Yusuf Khan had to adopt a Hindu screen name, such as Dilip Kumar to hide his Muslim ancestry from

the predominantly Hindu (approximately 900 million Hindus in a population of 1.2 billion Indians) movie-going masses. Farhan Akhtar's patriotic *Lakshya* not only benefited the producer commercially but also sought to endear him to a larger political audience, especially the BJP (a Hindu right wing national party, which was in power during the production of the movie and which was expected to win the elections of May 2004 but finally lost by the time this movie was released in Jun 2004). It should come as no surprise that the government uses war movie propaganda not only against an external enemy but also against the opposition political parties, which have been treated as no less than the enemy, especially during election time. This trend is not peculiar to Bollywood. On the campaign trail, Vice President Cheney cited *Black Hawk Down* when he argued that insufficiently resolute military power in Mogadishu had led to later attacks on the United States. This was a scathing attack on Clinton's flawed Somalian policy by referring to a movie. This allusion to movies at the highest level meant that the government endorsed the message of *Black Hawk Down* as the true story without any "Hollywood" exaggerations.[35] War movies are fantastic propaganda machines and as a robust democracy like India finds out every five years, it is a tremendous publicity organ for the ruling parties during elections. Thus almost all war movies, which show the current ruling party in a good light is given a tax-holiday. Even the best of actors, who have no political affiliations, are forced to act in jingoistic movies to preserve their commercial interests by feeding a larger narrow minded target audience and pleasing political parties, who do not hesitate to use the tool of tax-inspectors to force stars and production houses to toe the government line. Having seen how the producers and the government attempt to gain leverage over one another in the shaping of a war movie, let us see how and why these two interest groups adapt Bollywood war movies to cater to an international audience.

The requirement by the producers for being accepted transcends national borders. Bollywood producers and actors believe they are part of a larger international audience and therefore project their movies in a manner that would be acceptable to a viewer in India, Pakistan and many Arab countries (with subtitles or dubbing). Targeting a wider audience in a war movie is especially difficult. However, the returns in terms of credibility (for the producer) and deeper cultural understanding is the added advantage, if we are to accept that production houses are not always after profit. Gokulsing emphasizes this line of reasoning when he states that, "By studying a culture we acquire deeper understanding of the customs, behavior patterns, values, arts and crafts and the practices of everyday life of the people inhabiting that culture."[36] On a more constructivist outlook, the appeal of the Bollywood movie has allowed it to become the unofficial cultural ambassador for the country, which can be a valuable tool when navigating the murky landscape of the greater middle east (Morocco to Afghanistan), where Bollywood movies are still very popular. One of the greatest superstars of Bollywood, Amitabh Bachchan had rightly remarked that, "It could be at Deauville in France or at Marrakech in Morocco, or anywhere else for that matter, the world has decided to take our movies to heart."[37] This exposure, however, can be a double edged sword. The censor board of the concerned country ensures that no inflammatory material affecting the sensitivities of its population is screened. However, this would also mean that a foreign government could selectively screen or sensationalize inflammatory movies and use this as propaganda to garner public support against the country from where the movie originated. In Hollywood, the use of *All Quiet on the Western Front* by the Nazis to further their propaganda against Jews and Americans is a case in point. Bollywood movies, especially war movies are seen as, or have been portrayed by the Pakistani government as propaganda by the Indian government.[38] Therefore Bollywood war movies can

seriously hinder the diplomatic relations between India and Pakistan. This consideration has been factored by the (Indian) government arm of the triad by using its censor board to not only censor particular scenes but also to pressurize the production team to modify the script. It is important to keep in mind that government involvement may be to not only further its own propaganda, but also to prevent use of a particular movie by anti-national elements and hostile countries or societies as propaganda against it. There is no denying the fact that even though a movie may have had no government assistance, it is still viewed by an international audience as being the propaganda of that country's government, in the case of Hollywood, it is the US government and in the case of Bollywood, it is the Indian government. This is probably (and justifiably) because the international audience and their governments would find it unacceptable or even unbelievable that the government (US, Indian) has no control over what gets produced in their country. However, it is prudent to analyze this effect on the international target audience, especially to those governments/societies inimical to US interests. The US government, its producers and even the US target audience must understand that more often than not, the US Hollywood movie is still the window to the US culture. For example, Gokulsing has remarked that, "Cinema clearly opens a most useful window onto a culture…."[39] This identification of *reel* life with *real* life by the international target audience needs to be understood by the US and its citizens by using a different reference frame than their own. For the majority of non-English speaking audience, the government approved movies with subtitles are still the only window to view US society and its Armed forces. Foreign governments may not be able to influence Hollywood war movie production the way the US government can do, but they have even a more powerful tool. They can carry out thought control and shape the perception of their target audience (citizens) by choosing which Hollywood movies to screen and what to censor, not to mention distorting entire

dialogues and scripts by manipulating the subtitles or the dubbing. Having understood the psyche of the international target audience, let us analyze how the changing needs of the US audience have influenced the war movie production in the US.

Understanding the US Target Audience

Let us analyze the movies *Gathering of Eagles* (*GOE*) and *Dr. Strangelove* using the triad lens of government, producer and target audience. *GOE* was the third in the series of movies made on Strategic Air Command (SAC); the previous two being *Strategic Air Command* (*SAC*) and *Bombers B-52*. In this case the government interest - championed by Gen Curtis Le May, the head of SAC - was to make movies, which showcased the might of the USAF, particularly the SAC. "Through the popular culture campaign," Steve Call states, "Air Power advocates had convinced many that the one factor deterring the Soviets from launching an attack was the certainty of annihilation at the hands of US strategic nuclear bombardment."[40] He further adds that, "Numerous magazine articles focused on the command's vigilance…The coverage also extended to SAC's commander, (Gen) Curtis E. LeMay, making the two virtually synonymous…Perhaps the most notorious facet of the veneration of SAC was the series of movies made specifically to showcase the command and its needs; collectively known as the "SAC trilogy."[41] General LeMay's interest, therefore, were aggrandizement; but also propaganda against *Dr. Strangelove*, Stanley Kubrick's anticipated satirical movie on the same theme.[42] The theme was the nuclear race between US and Soviet Union based on Peter George's book *Red Alert*, which had an anti-war flavor. The interests of the other communicator i.e. the producer of *GOE* was to cash in on the popularity of the previous two movies of the *SAC trilogy*. Therefore, one can see this as purely a commercial interest from their side, though like many production teams of war movies at that time, the producer and the director were WWII veterans and

patriotism as a driving interest is a distinct possibility.[43] However, the target audience had undergone a revolutionary transformation from the great and "good war" days of WWII to the "forgotten war" days of the Korean War and finally to the 24/7 Cold War days colored by the nuclear weapons threat. In his book *Guts and Glory*, Suid says, "During the 1960s the nation's perception of its armed forces underwent a profound transformation. As the WWII victories receded from memory and the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis threatened the American people with nuclear holocaust, disenchantment with things military began to develop."[44] This was also about the time that much anti-war literature was gaining prominence, namely, *Red Alert*, *Catch-22*, and so forth. The deadly seriousness of the nuclear stand-off in the Cold War created tension for all involved. In his research study, *The Air Force through the Eyes of Hollywood*, Caughlin remarked that, "The very fact that these (nuclear) weapons were in the hands of the military was an extreme threat to those who even under natural circumstances distrust the military mind. Books, articles, television programs and movies began to reflect these fears."[45] What else changed the taste of the target audience? What else had changed since *SAC* and *GOE*? Why had the target audience, that is, the American public become so ambivalent to the nuclear threat of the Soviet Union? The answer may lie in what Steve Call mentions as the phenomenon of "cognitive dissonance." This phenomenon refers to the discrepancy between people's fears and their actions when the options become too complex for easy solution. Steve states that, "Missiles that could strike suddenly with little or no warming made countering the Soviet threat too complex…Increasingly people chose not to choose."[46] The communicators, that is, the producer (of *GOE*) and the government did not read this shifting trend. As a counterfactual, let us assume that they did read this shifting trend. Was the failure of *GOE* inevitable? A good director working with a good script can subtly convey a message. Conversely, let us imagine that *GOE*

did not have any of the limitations of a new target audience and that the movie was screened in

the late 50s. Would it have been a success? Probably not, because as Steve Call observes,

> By the mid-1950s, though, doubts emerged in the popular culture depiction of air
> power…Increasingly air power's image as the best deterrent to war had to compete
> with images of the Mad Bomber, best reflected in *Dr. Strangelove's* Generals Jack
> D. Ripper and Buck Turgidson, both of whom threatened to plunge the world into
> a nuclear holocaust.[47]

So was *GOE* effective in achieving the interests for which it was made? Target audience

panned it, the producers did not gain due to commercial failure and the government propaganda

result can be gauged by the response of the target audience to a movie that wanted to convey a

diametrically opposite propaganda, and that movie was the outrageously hilarious, stupendously

successful, *Dr. Strangelove*. This mood is noted by Michael Paris, who in his book *From the*

Wright Brothers to Top Gun says, "A recurring theme in the film (*GOE*) is how it would be

impossible for SAC to accidentally trigger a nuclear war – an idea pursued two years later in *Dr.*

Strangelove and *Fail Safe*."[48] Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* can be analyzed using the

triad.

We have already seen the shifting priorities of the target audience. Let us study the other

two parts of the triad. Firstly, the producer, Stanley Kubrick already had a reputation as a good

filmmaker, which made his movie highly anticipated even before it was released. For the

government, the only thing worse than not employing good producers to make their propaganda

war movies is when the good producers make anti-war movies! The *GOE* producers, however,

were not in the same league as Stanley Kubrick, who was brilliant enough to modify the original

storyline (based on the novel *Red Alert*) and package the movie as a satire on the danger of

nuclear weapons in the hands of a crazy General. This underlines the fact that hiring a good

producer to make a war movie is a definite advantage whenever the government wants to

effectively spread its propaganda. Frank Capra's and Walt Disney's credentials added credibility to *Why We Fight* and *Victory through Air Power* propaganda movies respectively during WWII. Clearly the interaction between the triad will help analyze how to make meaningful war movies.

Producing Meaningful War Movies

The antecedents and credentials of the director/production house make a big difference to the success and to the eventual acceptance of any movie, leave alone a war movie. Therefore, *Dr. Strangelove* and *Apocalypse Now* benefited from having acclaimed directors like Stanley Kubrick and Francis Ford Coppola respectively. However, success of relative newcomer Oliver Stone's *Platoon* in 1986 discounted any generalization of a war movie's success being attributed exclusively on the antecedents of the director. *Platoon* was critically acclaimed and considered by many to be the most realistic portrayal of war on film, at that time.[49] These movies were accepted as the authoritative movies that depicted the reality that was Vietnam, probably with some assistance from the publicity and recognition accorded by winning Academy Awards. This trend of the "independent producer" (no government assistance) handling bold and controversial topics, which predominantly involved war, began in the 1960s, of which *Catch-22* is an example. Caughlin says, "The big studios were no longer powerful (or big) and many of the new independent producers were making films of 'social significance' and what war movies they made had a decided anti-war flavor."[50] These independent producers and their bold *anti-government* trend is a theme that is seen in the 21st century with Michael Moore and his *Fahrenheit 9/11*. While certain filmmakers have carved a niche for themselves as decidedly anti-war and pacifists like Lewis Milestone of *All Quiet on the Western Front* fame, others are anti-government like Michael Moore and still others keep their audiences guessing by adopting radically opposing views. For example, Oliver Stone went from making an anti-war movie

Platoon to anti-government movie *JFK* to pro-patriotic movies like *World Trade Centre* (Post 9/11). The producer and the government generally are not in consonance as to whether the war movie is being made for entertainment or propaganda. George Freitas remarked,

> The truth is war films are about more than simply entertaining an audience. They should be viewed as a mixture of entertainment and as an attempt to influence public opinion. In fact, propaganda and entertainment have become so intertwined that it's nearly impossible to separate them, particularly in the best war movies.[51]

After narrowing down the target audience based on entertainment or propaganda, one can now judge the public sentiment.

This judgment should not be based on previous success of similar franchises or themes. For example, as regards the *SAC trilogy*, a successful *SAC* or *B-52* does not automatically translate to a permanent winning solution and this was exemplified by the failure of *GOE*, the third film of the *SAC trilogy*. Suid says, "To succeed as art and as entertainment, a movie should also contain people with whom the audience can empathize."[52] Casting a relatively unknown Lew Ayres as the leading role in *All Quiet on the Western Front* allowed the audience to absorb the faceless nature of war. In other times it pays to have famous actors and extravagant production to handle a weak script, an unpopular theme, or an unreceptive audience. In *Longest Day*, which was released in the supposedly anti-war early 1960s, Chambers remarks,

> Zanuck's decision to cast famous stars as not only the principal historical figures of the invasion but even in cameo appearances as average soldiers had great audience appeal. The countless stars, the major spectacle of so many people and so much equipment, dynamic special effects, and faithful reproduction in moving images of many of the still photographs of the actual invasion helped make the Longest Day a major success at the box office.[53]

It is important to note that this is the same audience that negatively received *GOE,* which was released in the same year. Zanuck's technique of "shocking" and "aweing" and as a result

"wowing" the audience with spectacle, dramatics and barrage of star power in *Longest Day* was used by other directors in *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon*, but to convey an anti-war theme. While 1986 celebrated the Oscar winning anti-war *Platoon*, the same target audience embraced Tony Scott's pro-military *Top Gun* making it the top-grossing film of 1986.[54] So successful was this "full government assistance" *Top Gun* that the government set up recruitment stalls outside movie theatres.[55] Spectacle and Star power, it seems, worked equally good for anti-war and war movies. Paris explains that, "*Top Gun's* plot may well be familiar from a host of 1930s aviation features but it is a film with everything: exciting, well-filmed aerial sequences, an impressive array of the navy's latest jet aircraft, attractive cast, a powerful rock and roll soundtrack and all the glamour of the world of the elite fighter pilot. It is also an intensely patriotic film which celebrates the skill and devotion of navy fliers and American technology. It revived the cult of the air fighter and restyled him as a hero for the 1980s."[56] Some directors, like Clint Eastwood went one step ahead and used a *cinematic argumentative style* by releasing two movies giving the opposing views and allowing the audience to make up its own mind, namely, *Flag of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*. While trying to show a 360 degree view the producer has to be careful because it could back-fire as the audience might reject it, especially if the script seems to be distorted to cater to multiple audiences, as in *Pearl Harbor*. Prominent film critic Roger Ebert observed that, "It (Pearl Harbor) is an unremarkable action movie; Pearl Harbor supplies the subject, but not the inspiration."[57] Having identified the importance of entertainment and audience involvement, let us analyze the government response.

Government Response

The dilemma is what if the government propaganda is in opposition to the popular mood? In this case the government should drop (no assistance, counter propaganda or censorship) the movie, as it can cause more harm than good. Arguably, *Dr. Strangelove* benefited immensely from the unpopularity of the *GOE*. However, more often than not, the government is not likely to accept this option, especially if the face of that government happens to be someone as formidable as Gen Curtis Le May. Therefore, it is important for a good production house spreading the government propaganda to retain audience interest. This it can achieve through masterful script and direction, which gives a balanced view of the governments propaganda. For example, *GOE* story line would have been more acceptable if it had encouraged the audience to understand the relevance of *SAC* and the lack of alternatives to handle the Soviet nuclear threat. Steve Call says, "The movie (*GOE*) assumed its audience recognized and accepted that SAC was critical to national survival. There are no speeches about how *SAC* or air power in general is the only thing standing between the US people and nuclear annihilation."[58] Reinforcing that the producers of *GOE* should have emphasized the existential threat to the country as opposed to the open ended nature of anti-war movies is highlighted by Caughlin when he observes that, "Anti-military films like *Dr. Strangelove* attempted to show that the military could not be entrusted with the instruments of national survival but the problem was that this and other similar anti-war films like *Fail Safe* made no attempt to show who should be given the task."[59] However no amount of script can compensate for good production in terms of good direction, good acting, and as is the case in the present day, good and believable special effects. In turn, no amount of good production can ignore the analyses of the target audience. All the more reason the government needs to be very careful how it wants its war movies to depict it. Sometimes the absence of information can be propaganda. So the fact that *The Green Berets* (which was a disaster, and I

am not referring to John Wayne!) was the only (pro-war) movie made regarding Vietnam during the Vietnam war speaks volumes about what the government did not want to say. Caughlin notes that, "*The Green Berets* was the only film made by a major studio dealing with an American war that lasted more than a decade. This is an amazing fact when one considers the hundreds of films spawned by the earlier wars."[60]

Using the triad, let us analyze how the government counters such negative propaganda, other than by remaining silent. In such cases there is very little that the government can do especially if there is a lot of substance to the negative portrayal of the government and the forces. The Vietnam War was an unpopular war and whatever the government said was not going to change that. "By 1970, it was fashionable to laud a film that pointed out the insanity and cruelty of war and its participants, and to pan one that attempted to extol the heroics of war."[61] Utilizing censor boards to prevent release or control the story line, is only likely to sensationalize and add to the popularity of the movie, and add credence to the claim that the government was hiding something. At the best the government can appeal to the patriotic side of the production house or even commission a reputable production house to come out with its own version of the story. Looking at the war from the enemy's point of view by screening dubbed or subtitled foreign movies is another way for the government to gain credibility by allowing another country's movie to provide positive propaganda for the US government. In the early 1960s two Japanese movies were released in the US, *I Bombed Pearl Harbor* (1961) and *Attack Squadron* (1963).[62] Both these movies gave the story of the WWII from the Japanese perspective, which was portrayed as one of regret after initial euphoria. Therefore by allowing the selective screening of chosen Japanese movies, the US government allowed these Japanese anti-war movies to become US pro-war movies.

Increasingly even the government in this globalized information age has realized that transparency is the best propaganda, especially when the national mood can be easily shaped. The "mercurial change in national mood (of target audience)," is succinctly described by Peter C Collins in *Why We Fought*, where he highlights the public outrage against Susan Sarandon and the Dixie Chicks for their criticism of Bush and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) in 2003; whereas, separated in time, an even more virulent and bold attack against Bush's policies by Michael Moore in 2004 in his movie *Fahrenheit 9/11* was widely appreciated. In the first case, "The reactions," Peter says, "were 180 degrees from the Vietnam-era responses; an active public-assisted by the Internet, talk radio, and cable television news-refused to accept the posturing of the Hollywood elite." [63] This exemplifies the government's war narrative effectively influencing media to spread its propaganda. However, "he who lives by the sword dies by the sword," and this media tool was equally manipulated by director (the producer), Michael Moore, to influence the public opinion against the government. The dynamic relation of the triad is once again crucial. The successful communicator, be it the producer or the government conveys its propaganda by taking into consideration the mood of the target audience at any particular instant of time. Arguably, Michael Moore would have received similar hostile treatment that Dixie Chicks and Susan Sarandon received in 2003, if his *Fahrenheit 9/11* had been released in that same time period. In movies and especially so in war movies, the period when the actual war occurred and the timing of the related war movie release have an overbearing effect on its reception by the target audience. Fretias remarked, "Sometimes truth-telling in war films can only take place years after the fact, similar to declassifying secret documents. In some cases the facts aren't known; other times the truth isn't considered entertaining. But more often than not, directors and producers are concerned that controversial, fact-based films will not do well at the

box-office."[64] Interestingly, Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* in its portrayal of the government of President George W Bush as the villain and depiction of the US soldier as being used by the politicians, steered clear of being an *anti-military* movie. Its anti-war theme was focused more on the failure and hidden agenda of the top leadership and therefore we can safely categorize it as an anti-government movie than anything else. Therefore, we see that the use of the war theme in movies as a propaganda against the government administration rather than against war is likely to elicit a favorable response from the target audience but an even greater reprisal from the pro-government propaganda machinery. In *Why We Fought*, Jeffrey Chown says, "Attempts to discredit the film have been extensive, ranging from Web sites, counterfilms, books, and major magazine articles to screeds from television commentators."[65] However, both the government and the producer have to be cautious when using the virtual battleground of the audio visual media to counter each other's propaganda. Caughlin had aptly summarized that, "Either type of movie is ludicrous if the propaganda is laid on too thick."[66]

The government, as the elected representative of the people is logically and legally better positioned to arbitrate on the national interests and the propaganda that it wants to convey. Therefore, the government needs to reassess continuously the requirements of the target audience that do not generally choose the side of the government's or the producer's propaganda, but rather chose the side of a well-made movie, irrespective of what propaganda it conveys. One unifying and undeniable theme that can be inferred is that while the target audience being targeted by a producer/director may change depending upon who they are selling their propaganda to; the quality of the war movie will override any strong affinity to a producer/director. If a war movie is well produced, the target audience will buy it. Period!

Keeping this in mind, the success story of *Black Hawk Down* as a win-win-win situation for all the three interest groups is likely to be the best approach for the government.

Best Government Approach

In the movie *Black Hawk Down*, which is a combat (war) movie based on the US military operation that went horribly wrong in Somalia, the movie epitomizes the winning formula that aptly summarizes our prescription for making a war movie which is entertaining and effective in spreading government propaganda at the same time. In *Why We Fought*, John Lawrence too had expressed his bewilderment at this when he posed the question,

> When producers, actors, military professionals, civilian and political leaders, film critics, and the general public all agree on both the artistic merits and the accuracy of a popular film about a controversial episode, a historically minded person cannot resist asking a few questions: What kind of film could produce such a remarkable consensus?[67]

The production team had a well reputed producer-director team in Jerry Bruckheimer and Ridley Scott, who used spectacle in the form of star cast and visuals to provide spectacle to the audience. The critics remarks included, "Harrowing dramatization…ferocious battles scenes recreated in brutal detail…Action, which is fierce, intense, and non-stop…brilliant visuals…fine ensemble cast."[68] Lawrence remarks that, "*Black Hawk Down* had high production values and it had won Oscars and other awards for editing, sound…nominations for cinematography and direction."[69] Therefore, it was only natural that the target audience embraced it. Curiously, the international target audience also took notice and Lawrence writes that Saddam Hussein was recommending *Black Hawk Down* as training for urban counterinsurgency against US invaders.[70] However, though the movie shows the US military operations in a bad light, the government (at the time of release) of George W. Bush fully endorsed the movie by giving it full military

assistance during production and thereafter, publicly after its release when top civilian and

uniformed leaders attended the Washington premiere. The reason for the government's (White

House and Pentagon top brass) support for this movie based on humiliating US defeat at the hand

of Somalian warlords, is provided by Lawrence, when he says,

> Leave No man behind is the movie's tag line, suggesting that the operational
> difficulties reflect this commitment to save lives and bodies. It is one of several
> displacement strategies that divert attention from the serious tactical
> miscalculation and command failures…But what they actually did was not the
> premise of the "No man left behind" tagline. Just as the blame for fatal choices in
> terms of combat gear is shifted downward to the young rangers, the upward shift
> of credit for the retrieval of Wolcott's body gives the top command a more
> heroic aura. This dance of reassignment reflects a standard bureaucratic practice:
> push blame downward; pull credit upward.[71]

The Pentagon top brass (part of the government arm of our triad) were made to look good

in the movie and factual errors were excusable as long as those factual errors involved shifting of

blame to the lower military commanders and soldiers and the credit upwards to the Generals.

Lawrence writes on Col Tom Matthews, Air Commander of TF Ranger, which was the unit

involved in the actual operations that,

> He tried to ensure complete technical accuracy, but his recommendations were
> frequently rejected by the filmmakers as –not Hollywood entertainment. Dramatic
> entertainment values trumped the requirements of factual accuracy and plausible
> renditions of military procedure…Perhaps the answers to these questions lie in the film's
> effect of shifting the responsibility for miscalculations downward to the battlefield
> soldiers – and away from policy makers and military commanders.[72]

Interestingly, the DODs own guidelines for assistance to filmmakers demand that

"production must be authentic in its portrayal of actual persons, military operations, and

historical events."[73] Clearly the duplicity shown by Pentagon regarding the full assistance

provided to *Black Hawk Down* in spite of not being "authentic in its portrayal" means that while

requiring assistance from the military all that the producer needs to do is modify the script to

make the Generals look good. The Bush Administration (part of the government arm of the triad), as we have already mentioned, used the negative propaganda elements as arsenal against the Democrats. The positive propaganda of the American soldier's heroism while confronting tremendous odds was gainfully exploited as the ideals that the Bush Administration stood for. In the words of Suid, "American spirit was the real hero (of the movie)."[74] This movie, more than any other, exemplifies Lawrence H. Suid's "mutual exploitation" concept.[75] Suid only intended this term as describing the symbiotic relationship between *the producer* and *the government*. From our analysis of the complex relationship between the triad of war movie interest groups, we can conclusively add the *target audience* part of the triad to the definition. This expands the meaning of "mutual exploitation" to include the symbiotic relationship between *the producer* and *the government* under a continuous iterative feedback relationship from *the target audience*.

Conclusion

The effectiveness of the war movie in spreading propaganda depends upon the complex interaction between the triad, that is, the three interest groups, namely, the government, the producer – the communicators, and the target audience- the recipient of communication. The making of a war movie requires a deep understanding of the target audience. This target audience and its interest is subject to variation depending on context, time-period, geographical location, and so forth. We saw how the target audience is cultivated by the government for propaganda and the producer for commercial interests. We have seen that the Bollywood and Hollywood war movie production have as many similarities as they have differences. However, the need of their target audience is likely to vary significantly. To make things even more complex, we saw how the governments can manipulate and exploit foreign war movies for their propaganda. In spite of the current trend of anti-war movies by independent film makers, it is in the government's

interest to understand the target audience and more importantly the nuances of good war movie production. To ensure positive utilization of the war movies for propaganda, the best government approach would involve "mutual exploitation," but to include the symbiotic relationship between *the producer* and *the government* under a continuous iterative feedback relationship from *the target audience*. While for the producer it is important that the war movie be more entertaining than truthful; for the government it is important that the war movie be a vehicle for its propaganda, making most war movies an exercise in disinformation. The logic of making a good war movie, from the government perspective, is in achieving the fine balance between entertainment and propaganda. However, the target audience needs to understand that ultimately "war never takes place in a political or moral vacuum and that war by itself is never entertaining."[76] The government's tremendous belief in the propaganda potential of the movie is echoed in the timeless truth of Anthony Burgess's comment on movies: "It's funny how the colors of the real world only seem really real when you watch them on a screen."[77]

End Notes

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